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ABSTRACT

In the Ganado Public School District (K-12, 1,650 students), in the northeast corner of the Navajo Reservation, an administrative retreat structure has been used for 4 years to promote the team management concept and maintain the District's formal direction. Building from a comprehensive needs assessment by and for the District's Navajo communities, the all-Navajo school board has adopted a District philosophy, and individual schools have constructed goal statements to implement it. Retreats provide a setting conducive to clarifying and reaffirming direction without office distractions. A team management approach and democratic leadership style are used. Essential aspects of retreats are preplanning, scheduling, and followthrough. Preplanning must establish clear expectations, with all participants contributing to the retreat agenda. Site selection and selection of the planning team are critical. Retreat products include goals and objectives developed by the board for the administrative team to implement through identification of activities and development of a work plan which indicates projected completion dates and persons responsible. Intangible results include improved collegial relationships, clearer understanding of District direction, and renewed commitment to implementing goals and objectives. Follow-through should include periodic review during the year. (MH)

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When You Don't Know What's Important: Revitalizing Decision-making in the Native American School

by

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When You Don't Know What's Important:
Revitalizing Decision-making in the Native American School

Decision-making occurs within a context of expectations, not within a vacuum. As decision makers, administrators act or react to situations based upon the expectations existing within the environment. If formal expectations such as a school philosphy or district goals are absent, the administrator reacts to the informal expectations he/she perceives to exist. Without clearly stated parameters to govern administrative performance, however, the leader may unintentionally direct the school away from the community's educational priorities.

Unfortunately, many adminstrators in Native American educational systems are left to define the expectations of the school and to determine their own direction within the school setting. Under these circumstances, conflict may arise between the actual needs of the institution which serves the native child and the needs as perceived by the individual.

The Context

In the Ganado Public Schools, located in the northeast corner of the Navajo Reservation, the district administrators have experienced both ends of this continuum. Over the past several years though, the 1650 student, k-12 district has grown in sophistication, making great strides by formalizing, refining, and verifying desired direction. This article discusses Ganado's administrative retreat structure

utilized during the past four years to promote the team management concept and to maintain the District's formal direction.

Building from a comprehensive needs assessment completed within and around the Navajo communities served by the district, the all Navajo School Board has established and adopted a district philosophy and the individual school units have constructed goal statements to implement the philosophy's intended direction. Periodic review of goals and objectives by the District's administrative team provides for monitoring and midcourse corrections as needed. Realistic objectives are maintained while others may lose their status due to the constant nature of change within the educational milieux. In addition, annual objectives which have been completed are recognized and provide a sense of accomplishment.

Extending from the formal direction established by the philosophy, the district's administrators, under the leadership of a Navajo superintendent, have developed a strong team approach to leadership. Meeting regularly in retreat settings to review and establish district-wide objectives and activities, they work together to refine the effectiveness and efficiency of the district's educational and academic support systems.

The Retreat

The word retreat implies "getting away", and the basic utility of the retreat is to provide a conducive setting in which to clarify and reaffirm direction without the attendant distractions of the office. A well-planned retreat has the power to revitalize its participants and to keep them from stagnating or becoming isolated in their

decision making. The retreat can also be a signal that change is possible and that frustrations can be vented constructively.

Central to the success of the retreat structure is an established team management approach and a democratic leadership style. These are essential, since the group must work closely to put the year's tasks into perspective. In this strategy for long-range planning, the participants must develop open communication lines between departments and must be willing to expose both personal and professional views. If these goals are to be achieved, then comradery and trust must be built.

During many retreats, administrators review the district's goals and determine the degree to which the various departments of the district support established priorities. Clarifying the present condition of these elements and the improvements implemented during the past year, they outline future activities. The concept aims to develop: a partnership among administrators; a common ownership of the direction; and a strengthened commitment to this structure.

Most importantly, the retreat must have the full support of the district. Although it is essential for the Board to recognize the retreat as an important and valid administrative decision making structure, the process must also be a funded priority. The allocation of funds to implement the retreat will permit the administrative team to program the needed flexibility for planning and for carrying out the retreat.

The Approach

Approaching each retreat somewhat uniquely over the years, the

Ganado multicultural administrative staff has learned about the importance of team work. They have also learned about the difficulties which are encountered when honest, open discussions address needed adjustments within the school system. As a result, each retreat resulted in a maturing and a refinement in the decision-making process. To these ends, several aspects of the retreat process merit discussion. These are: preplanning, scheduling, and followthrough.

Preplanning

Our experience demonstrates that while there are many possible approaches to conducting an effective retreat, the first step remains to establish clear expectations for retreat outcomes. This is important since each participant brings unique vants and desires to the retreat setting. Therefore, an instrument to focus attention on priority issues is central.

The retreat agenda is an instrument which provides the necessary structure consisting of formal and informal opportunities to brainstorm ideas and to vent mutual administrative concerns and frustrations. However, preplanning will delimit its context. In this regard, it is important to clarify the major issues and to address the retreat process and expected products.

Since all participants contribute to the retreat agenda, a sense of commitment and ownership is often created among the staff. Nevertheless, the agenda should be available prior to departure to allow participants to prepare necessary materials and to consider solutions in advance allowing for greater time efficiency while at the

retreat.

Site Planning and Selection

The retreat process includes deciding where, when, and how the retreat will take place. A critical factor in this decision will be the amount of time which can be devoted to the retreat-possibly one, two, or three days. The retreat location largely determines the amount of time spent formally and informally addressing the retreat's goals. Sites which are closer in proximity to the district effectively reduce travel time and fatigue which eat away at the available time.

Depending on the extent of the proposed agenda and the number of days which can be allotted, the selection of a non-restrictive environment, conducive to both informal and formal discussions, is suggested. Roughing it outdoors may be preferred by some, however, we suggest a place where there are not too many survival issues so that the group can maximize their time interacting with the substantive issues surrounding school improvement. If the group must also worry about cooking and cleaning up, valuable time may be lost. In any event, administrators are high priced cooks and usually poorly qualified.

While many prefer to hold the retreat twice a year, some prefer to hold a retreat once during the summer when children are not around. In either event, all participants must be available. Since administrators within the district may have various contract dates, cooperation and commitment are necessary ingredients.

In answer to the question of how, there are many subtopics. The first question would have to be, Should the group plan and

implement the retreat with the aid of a consultant or should they brave it alone? This would depend upon the group's ability to execute issues analysis techniques and to brainstorm effectively.

A further consideration points to the selection of the team's membership and the roles of each person. Key staff should certainly be expected to participate and board members should be invited. Key staff at Ganado include the superintendent, assistant superintendent, four principals, business office manager, and the funded programs, curriculum and maintenance coordinators.

IMPLEMENTATION

If a decision is made to have the administrative staff organize and implement the retreat, assignments will need to be distributed. A facilitator to direct or focus discussion, a recorder, and, if you plan to break into small groups, team leaders may be needed. Bringing a secretary along to type documents is also suggested.

Bringing along copies of last year's goals, objectives, and activities, the district philosophy, chart paper, legal pads, and pencils are items that should be considered. Copies of other major documents which might be discussed would have to be evaluated prior to bringing them. However, remember that the retreat is a planning meeting. This would be the place to plan which documents might need revision and to develop a timeline, not necessarily to revise the document at the retreat. Actual revision may be a part of the timeline during the year.

RETREAT PRODUCTS

The retreat products will include the goals and objectives developed by the Board for the administrative team to implement through the identification of activities and the development of the work plan. This plan explicitly denotes projected completion dates and the person/people responsible. Products include tangibles as well as those intangible outcomes which are equally important to a strong team and the potential for successful realization of the objectives for the ensuing school year. The objectives which were finally accepted as attainable for the school year were listed according to categories such as curriculum, finances, and maintenance. These objectives were typed, duplicated and distributed for final review and amendment. A chart with the objective, expected date of completion, and person responsible was constructed.

Intangible results included improved collegial interrelationships, a clearer understanding of the direction the District should be taking, and a renewed commitment to implement the myriad of goals and objectives found within the school system.

FOLLOWTHROUGH

Subsequent to the conclusion of the retreat and the return to the real world of in-baskets and telephone interruptions, the plan must include periodic review by the team during the course of the year. The practicality of all systems requires ongoing assessment of direction statements in light of fluctuating circumstances, unexpected factors, and resource variables which impact the district. With new

information and developments within the expanding environments which influence all reservation schools, objective activities may vary, even be eliminated, while the overarching goals of the district continue to provide direction for charting the course of Native American education.

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